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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 MINSK 000032

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [BO](#)

SUBJECT: ON THE EVE OF LOCAL ELECTIONS MILINKEVICH COMMENTS
ON BELARUSIAN SOVEREIGNTY AND OPPOSITION

REF: A. MINSK 003

[1](#)B. MINSK 010

Classified By: Ambassador Karen Stewart for reason 1.4 (d).

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) Opposition coalition leader Milinkevich on January 11 expressed to Ambassador his concern for Belarus' sovereignty in the wake of the Russian-Belarusian gas and oil crisis. Milinkevich opined Russia had given up on Lukashenko and would achieve its goals in Belarus using strong economic pressure. The coalition leader criticized the opposition's failed local election campaign and political parties' preparations for a second congress that would not choose a coalition leader or include civil society. Milinkevich also suggested the international donor community better coordinate its efforts to provide more support to civil society. End summary.

Belarusian Independence Threatened

[1](#)2. (C) On January 11, Ambassador met with coalition leader Aleksandr Milinkevich at the latter's request. DCM, Pol/Econ Chief, and Poloff (notetaker) sat in on the meeting. Milinkevich expressed to Ambassador his concern that the Russian-Belarusian gas and oil crisis could threaten Belarus' sovereignty. The recent agreements made between Russia and Belarus were quick fixes and not a long-term solution to the inherent weaknesses in Belarus' economy (ref A). According to Milinkevich, Moscow no longer saw Lukashenko as a political partner, and since Russia presently cannot establish a strong political relationship with the GOB, it will go after Belarus economically. Lukashenko failed to make the necessary economic reforms when he had the financial ability to do so, leaving the economy unstable and at Russia's mercy.

[1](#)3. (C) Milinkevich informed Ambassador that his contacts in the Polish government suggested supporting the Lukashenko regime to preserve Belarus' sovereignty. Milinkevich told Ambassador that his response was that the regime should be supported only when it decides to implement democracy. Milinkevich chided the EU's endless debating and lack of direction in handling Belarus, claiming that the U.S was the "main guarantor" of Belarus' independence.

[1](#)4. (C) Ambassador replied that the USG has been careful not to praise Belarus while criticizing Russia's use of energy as a political tool. The USG shared Milinkevich's opinion that Belarus' independence should be preserved, but not by

abandoning democracy efforts. Ambassador noted that the EU, as Belarus' neighbor, could have greater influence on the GOB in regards to energy security.

Elections Were a Failure

15. (C) Milinkevich's second concern was the state of the opposition. Repeating what he posted on his website on January 12 (ref B), Milinkevich pointed to the opposition's failed local election campaign as a sign of their weakness. According to Milinkevich, the opposition pushed itself into "the ghetto" by not developing a widely publicized election campaign and focusing on collecting signatures for the congress of democratic forces rather than getting information to the voters. Ambassador expressed disappointment that the opposition did not take full advantage of the local elections, adding that the opposition would have plenty of time after the congress to plan for the parliamentary elections in 2008. DCM praised those opposition candidates who have taken full advantage of the campaign period to deepen contact with voters, but he agreed with Milinkevich's general assessment that party leaders have focused more often on the congress than on the elections.

The Congress Needs a Leader, Civil Society

16. (C) Milinkevich supported the convening of a second congress to reformat political party and coalition structures. However, he criticized party leaders' alleged hesitation to choose a coalition leader. According to Milinkevich, a central leadership position was needed, whether it be one with broad powers or one that rotates, to unite the opposition and move it forward.

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The Civil Society Crusader

17. (C) The coalition leader also noted that civil society was being excluded from the congress, which would bring the opposition more loss than gain. (Comment: This could be rather self-serving; Milinkevich, who always favored civil society over party politics, may seek support for an opportunity separate from the congress to rally NGOs. End comment.) Milinkevich asserted that only united would the opposition be victorious. If political parties had used civil society groups in the current election campaign, they would have been able to distribute information about candidates in local newspapers, bulletins, and the internet. Milinkevich told Ambassador that his mission was to unite these two groups, claiming that he was the only one in the opposition with the civil society experience and public recognition to do so.

(U.S.) Donors Need to Spread the Wealth

18. (C) Milinkevich claimed that the donor community needed to better coordinate its support of the Belarusian opposition. According to Milinkevich, the U.S. NGOs National Democratic Institute and International Republican Institute worked well with party structures, but Belarusian NGOs and civil society were not getting enough support. This was evident in the opposition's inability to support its members who were fired for their political activities. Because of the lack of employment opportunities and nowhere to go for support, local council candidates who were threatened with unemployment had no choice but to drop out of the race.

19. (C) Milinkevich suggested the creation of a coordinated council of donors with the USG playing a leading role. Ambassador cited U.S. efforts to coordinate support to pro-democracy groups in Belarus, noting existing working

groups with parties and independent media. Ambassador told Milinkevich that civil society groups had the same opportunity for donor support as did political parties.

¶10. (C) Milinkevich also suggested that when senior opposition leaders travel to Washington at some point, key civil society representatives be included. Ambassador mentioned nascent plans for such an opportunity and that appropriately broad representation would be important.

Changing Public Opinion on the EU

¶11. (C) DCM asked Milinkevich if his recent editorial (written jointly with the German Marshall Fund) supporting Belarus' entry into the EU reflected his true opinion. Milinkevich said he was convinced that Belarus would be in the EU within 5-15 years. Belarus currently had no EU plans but should take advantage of its neighbors' EU status to build a European future. According to Milinkevich, recent polls indicated that more and more Belarusians were looking towards the West.

Bringing Satellite to the Village

¶12. (C) Milinkevich directed Ambassador's attention to a television project being created by the Poles in which Belarus-focused programming would be broadcast by satellite into Belarus. However, without international support, the project would fail. Ambassador noted our active support of other media projects but agreed to look into the feasibility of this project.

Comment

¶13. (C) Since November, Milinkevich has been very active in the local election campaign, traveling to 41 cities all over the country to campaign on behalf of local candidates. It is true that some of his senior UDF colleagues, particularly Kalyakin, have done little in comparison and have either called for boycotts, encouraged candidates to stop campaigning, or focused on collecting signatures for congress membership. Their lack of commitment drew public criticism from Milinkevich, which unfortunately the state propaganda used to make the opposition look more like a collection of individualists rather than a united group.

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¶14. (C) Milinkevich claims he is the ideal candidate for uniting the opposition parties and civil society groups - a claim he admitted to be rather immodest. He stressed that this unification of forces is the cornerstone of his "For Freedom" movement. However, Milinkevich's relationship with political party leaders is tenuous at best and the NGO community in Belarus lacks cohesion and a common mission. Milinkevich, whose own activity has been limited until recently, will have his work cut out for him in the coming months.
Stewart